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# Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve News Release

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## Historical Background: Battle of New Orleans

Chalmette, LA: The Battle of New Orleans was one of the most significant battles in American history--- the last important land battle of the War of 1812 and the last time the United States and Great Britain fought as enemies. The United States declared war on Great Britain in June 1812 to uphold American maritime rights, preserve American claims to the Louisiana Purchase, and drive the British from Canada. At that time, the British were at war with Napoleon's France, so action on the American front remained limited until Napoleon's defeat in May 1814 freed thousands of battle-tested British troops for an American campaign. In late November 1814, 10,000 British troops under the command of Maj. Gen. Sir Edward Pakenham set sail for New Orleans. Facing the British would be about 5,400 Americans under the command of Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson.

By December 14, 1814, the British had captured American gunboats on Lake Borgne. After an indecisive night battle on December 23, the British waited for reinforcements and the Americans prepared their defenses behind the Rodriguez Canal, which bordered the Chalmet plantation just downriver from New Orleans. They dug a mud rampart across a narrow strip of land between the Mississippi River and a cypress swamp, hoping to force the British troops through a bottleneck. As dawn broke on January 8, 1815, 7,000 British troops marched toward the rampart where 4,000 Americans waited for the order to fire.

The Battle of New Orleans lasted less than two hours, with the major fighting confined to about 30 minutes. Ironically, the British defeated the Americans on the west bank of the river, but the British on the east bank (at what is now Chalmette Battlefield) sounded the retreat after it became apparent that the battle was lost. At the battle, the Americans suffered fewer than 20 casualties (dead, wounded, or captured); the British sustained more than 2,000.

Many people believe the battle was unnecessary, since the Treaty of Ghent ending the war had been signed on December 24, 1814. However, the treaty stated that it was not binding and that fighting would continue until it was ratified by the governments of the United States and Britain and final copies of the treaty exchanged. Since the treaty did not specify what land would be awarded to the combatants, the Battle of New Orleans can literally be seen as a fight for New Orleans, since many in the British government did not feel that the Louisiana Purchase was legal and that therefore the United States did not own Louisiana or the Mississippi River when the war began. The War of 1812 officially ended on February 17, 1815, with no changes in the ownership of any territory.

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